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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 001222

NOFORN
SIPDIS

H FOR SENATORS MCCAIN, LIEBERMAN AND GRAHAM, FROM THE
AMBASSADOR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/23/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: SCENESCETTER FOR CODEL MCCAIN

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Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) USG activities in Bangladesh are based on three pillars: democratization, development and denial of space to terrorists. Your visit to Bangladesh comes in the twilight of the Caretaker Government's (CTG) two-year term, amid preparations for national Parliamentary elections in December. The return to democracy remains highly fluid. The two major parties -- the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Awami League -- have been playing a dangerous game of political chicken by insisting elections be held on terms they dictate. Although the Election Commission recently acceded to BNP demands and postponed elections until December 29, we expect the two parties to raise continuous demands until the eve of the elections. The USG is urging the Caretaker Government and both parties to act responsibly and to compromise to ensure free, fair and credible elections by year's end.

¶2. (SBU) You have a unique opportunity to help Bangladesh -- a strategically important, moderate, Muslim-majority nation of 150 million people -- successfully return to democracy. This country's utter lack of a bipartisan political ethos is a root cause of Bangladesh's dysfunctional democratic system. The call for national reconciliation in the U.S. in Senator McCain's concession speech on November 4 struck a strong chord among Bangladeshis yearning for more responsible political leadership. The Embassy has widely distributed the text of the speech, including placing it on the Embassy website in Bangla and English. Many local commentators have referred to its gracious tone glowingly, citing it as an example for Bangladeshi politicians to emulate. By emphasizing the same themes during his meetings with political and government leaders, all three of you can help create an atmosphere of bipartisanship that would serve Bangladesh well.

DEMOCRACY

¶3. (U) The Caretaker Government (CTG) came to power in January 2007, the day after the President declared a State of

Emergency to quell political violence in the run-up to Parliamentary elections. With the strong support of the military, the CTG canceled the elections and began cracking down on endemic political corruption and violence. The crackdown initially won broad public support, but frustration with the Caretaker Government spilled onto the streets in late August 2007, when a dispute at Dhaka University between students and soldiers became a rallying point for Bangladeshis disaffected by inflation, other economic woes, and restrictions on political activity. The Government stopped the protests by imposing a curfew. In April 2008, the Chief Adviser (i.e. Prime Minister) laid out a road map for returning to democracy, including the holding of Parliamentary elections by the end of the year.

14. (U) The mechanics of holding elections are largely on track. A reconstituted Election Commission compiled a new, credible voter list. The list was put to the test in city and municipal elections on August 4; turnout for the city polls ranged from 75 percent to 93 percent, and election observers reported only minor problems. In September 2008, the Caretaker Government set December 18 as the date for the delayed Parliamentary elections, but the BNP said it needed more time to prepare after the release from jail of its leader, former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. (Note: The Caretaker Government jailed both Zia and Awami League President Sheikh Hasina on a multitude of corruption charges in 2007. Zia was released on bail in September; Sheikh Hasina was out of the country on medical parole from June until November 6, when she made a triumphant return to Dhaka. End note.) The BNP also demanded lifting of the State of Emergency for the campaign, canceling Election Commission powers to unilaterally disqualify candidates at any time during the campaign, and delaying county-level elections.

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15. (C) The Election Commission on November 23 announced the Parliamentary elections would be moved back to December 29. Although the Caretaker Government did not fully meet the BNP's three other demands, the party's initial response was positive. The Awami League's leader, Sheikh Hasina, publicly criticized the delay, but privately assured the Embassy that her party would participate in the elections. The level of distrust among the Awami League, the BNP, and the Caretaker Government and its military supporters remains incredibly high, virtually guaranteeing an endless drumbeat of accusations and counter-accusations of political shennanigans throughout the campaign.

16. (SBU) On a positive note, Hasina and Zia exchanged greetings at an Armed Forces Day reception November 22. Media reports said the two women had not spoken to each other publicly in more than a decade, a reflection of their intense personal dislike and the nation's poisonous political atmosphere. The two parties rarely work together in Parliament and often launch violent protests against each other's policies and physically abuse and intimidate each other's followers. Still, leaders of both parties are at least discussing the possibility of ending the "winner-take-all" democracy practiced in Bangladesh. One proposal under consideration, for example, would ensure a significant role for the opposition party in Parliamentary committees.

DEVELOPMENT

17. (U) In the midst of the nation's political uncertainty, Bangladeshis are coping with the aftermath of natural disasters and spiraling inflation. Cyclone Sidr, with 160 mph winds at landfall, blasted through southwestern Bangladesh in November 2007, killing thousands of people, destroying the homes and livelihoods of millions, and leaving 2.3 billion USD of damage to infrastructure. As part of an

inter-agency effort, the U.S. military played a crucial role in relief efforts by airlifting vitally needed water, food and emergency supplies to Bangladeshis in remote areas. However, the Government of Bangladesh and other international donors have not sustained the strong levels of assistance provided in Sidr's immediate aftermath, and millions of victims remain in need of aid to rebuild their lives. The additional \$75 million for cyclone victims approved by the U.S. Congress thus came at a most opportune time. On top of natural disasters, inflation -- particularly of food prices -- remains dangerously high for Bangladeshis, 86 percent of whom subsist on less than \$2 a day. Our assistance levels remain high -- some 150 million USD last year. More important, economic growth, fueled by ready-made garment exports, has surpassed 6% annually over the past six years.

DENIAL OF SPACE TO TERRORISTS

18. (C) Bangladesh is a nation with porous borders -- both land and maritime -- that make it an attractive transit point and safe-haven for terrorists. Several USG studies this year have underlined just how poorly the borders are policed, and the Embassy is working on a multipronged approach with other Western Embassies to help Bangladesh improve its border security. The USG funds many programs in Bangladesh to counter terrorism, including a wide range of training under the Anti-Terrorist Assistance program coordinated by the State Department. USAID and Public Affairs Section programs also address root causes of extremism through outreach to leaders of influence (including religious figures) and to madrassas. The USG also will soon start training Bangladesh's premier counterterrorism force, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), whose history of alleged human rights violations prevented earlier engagement. The number of people allegedly killed in gun battles with RAB has decreased significantly since mid-2007, and the initial training will focus on further improving RAB's human rights record.

19. (S/NF) RAB arrested several hundred suspected members of
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Jamaatul Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB), an Islamic extremist group, after a wave of bombings and suicide attacks in late 2005, and recovered bomb-making materials and weapons from their hideouts. Those arrests, along with the execution in March 2007 of six senior JMB leaders, represented a clear blow to the organization. More recently, however, JMB reportedly has increased recruitment efforts. To date, the GOB has taken relatively little action against Bangladeshi groups with ties to transnational, Pakistan-based terrorist organizations. Concerns of possible violence by extremist organizations in the run-up to elections remain. On November 16, authorities in Dhaka arrested a JMB activist in possession of nearly 150 pounds of explosives.

110. (S/NF) To counter the transnational terrorist threat, Embassy Dhaka has recommended USG support for the creation of a Bangladesh Navy Special Operations unit, similar to US SEAL and Special Boat units. The Government of Bangladesh intends this unit to be a counterterrorism force that will address critical gaps in Bangladesh's maritime security capability. Transnational violent extremist organizations (such as Interagency Intelligence Committee on Terrorism (IICT) priority one Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LT) and IICT priority three Hizbul Mujahidin (HM)), transnational crime, drugs and human trafficking are currently exploiting these gaps to facilitate operations throughout South Asia. USG support for the creation of this new force is critical to denying space to terrorists. Additionally, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba is actively developing a maritime capability in order to infiltrate India; due to increases in land and air security within India, Bangladesh is a viable maritime launching point for these infiltration efforts.

¶11. (C) Senior officials from both the Awami League and BNP have assured the Embassy fighting terrorism will be a top priority of their parties. Your meetings with top political leaders will provide an opportunity to hammer home the importance of making good on those promises. Your meeting with Chief of Army Staff Gen. Moeen Uddin Ahmed will provide an opportunity to raise not only counterterrorism cooperation but also the importance of further professionalization of the Bangladesh military. Bangladesh is a top contributor to international peacekeeping operations and continued military-to-military cooperation between our two countries will help ensure Bangladeshi troops perform well as peacekeepers.

YOUR VISIT

¶12. (C) Thank you for making the effort to come to Bangladesh. Your visit comes at a critical juncture in this country's young history. The visit will highlight the importance the USG places on bilateral relations. Your meetings with political and government leaders will provide an opportunity to emphasize the importance of cooperation in tackling key national issues from poverty alleviation to crumbling infrastructure to denying space to terrorists. Stressing the importance of bipartisanship in working for a brighter future for Bangladesh will encourage a more stable political environment. That, in turn, will make Bangladesh a less attractive haven for international terrorists active in the region and worldwide.

¶13. (U) I regret that I will be in Washington for a long-scheduled conference during your visit. All members of the Mission are excited about your trip and will do everything possible to make it a success.

Moriarty